

## Message Text

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17

ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02

INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

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P 290630Z DEC 75

FM USLO PEKING

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4952

INFO AMCONSUL HONG KONG PRIORITY

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY TOKYO

AMEMBASSY TAIPEI

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

C O N F I D E N T I A L PEKING 2473

E.O.11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, CH, UR

SUBJECT: PRC RELEASE OF CAPTURED SOVIET HELICOPTER CREW

1. SUMMARY: CHINESE VICE FOREIGN MINISTER YU CHAN CALLED IN SOVIET AMBASSADOR TOLSTIKOV MORNING OF DECEMBER 27 TO INFORM HIM PRC HAD DECIDED TO RELEASE THE THREE SOVIET HELICOPTER CREW MEMBERS CAPTURED IN SINKIANG ON MARCH 14, 1974 AND RETURN THE EQUIPMENT. THE CHINESE STATEMENT INCLUDED A HIGHLY UNUSUAL NOTE OF CONTITION IN ITS COMMENT THAT THE INVESTIGATORS FOUND "CREDIBLE" THE MEN'S STATEMENT THAT THEIR OVERFLIGHT HAD BEEN UNINTENTIONAL, AND THE MFA'S DEPUTY DEPARTMENT DIRECTOR RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SOVIET UNION WENT SO FAR AS TO GIVE THE CREW A DINNER BEFORE RELEASING THEM TO SOVIET CUSTODY. SOVIET EMBASSY OFFICIALS HERE FROM THE AMBASSADOR DOWN WERE SURPRISED AND VERY PLEASED WITH THIS REMOVAL OF A MAJOR ABRASIVE ELEMENT IN SINO-SOVIET RELATIONS AND PROFESS TO HOPE FOR OTHER IMPROVEMENTS IN THEIR RELATIONS. EAST EUROPEAN DIPLOMATS MORE CYNICALLY SEE THIS AS A CAREFULLY TIMED CHINESE PLOY TO UNDERCUT SOVIET HARDLINERS IN DEBATES LEADING UP TO THE TWENTY-FIFTH PARTY CONGRESS. WE WOULD AGREE WITH THE EAST EUROPEAN ASSESSMENT AND THE COROLLARY THAT IT DOES NOT

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SIGNIFY A MAJOR REORIENTATION IN CHINESE SOVIET POLICY. END

SUMMARY.

2. SOVIET EMBASSY PERSONNEL WE HAVE TALKED TO DID NOT EXPECT THE CHINESE ACTION. ONE SAID THE RELEASE CAME "AS A COMPLETE SURPRISE" WITHOUT ANY PRIOR NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO SIDES OTHER THAN THE USUAL RESTATEMENT OF PREVIOUS POSITIONS. WHEN YU CHAN CALLED TOLSTIKOV IN, THE HELICOPTER CREW AS CONSIDERED A POSSIBLE TOPIC OF CONVERSATION, BUT THE SOVIETS, ACCORDING TO THEIR VERSION, WERE NOT PREPARED FOR THE ACCOMMODATING CHINESE LINE AND OBVIOUS PRC EAGERNESS TO FACILITATE THE HANDOVER OF THE MEN AND THE EQUIPMENT. THEY PROFESS TO BE PARTICULARLY STRUCK BY THE "APOLOGETIC" TONE OF THE CHINESE STATEMENT AND THE BACKTRACKING FROM THE MARCH 23, 1974 CHINESE NOTE ON THE INCIDENT WHICH HAD ATTACKED SOVIET "LIES" ON THE HELICOPTER'S ACTIVITIES AND CONCLUDED THAT "IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR THE SOVIET AUTHORITIES TO SHIRK THEIR CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY OF SENDING THIS HELICOPTER TO INTURDE INTO CHINA FOR ESPIONAGE." SOVIET EMBASSY PERSONNEL NOTED, IN PARTICULAR, THAT THE RELEASE WOULD MAKE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE SOVIET POPULATION.

3. THE RELEASED MEN, WHO ARE TO LEAVE ON THE REGULARLY SCHEDULED AEROFLOT FLIGHT TO MOSCOW DECEMBER 29, WERE APPARENTLY KEPT SEPARATED DURING MOST OF THEIR CAPTIVITY. ACCORDING TO SOVIET EMBOFFS, THEY WERE SHIFTED AROUND THE COUNTRY FOR SOME TIME AND THEN BROUGHT TO PEKING SUBURBS SEVERAL MONTHS AGO. ONE REPORT SOURCED TO A SOVIET MILITARY ATTACHE CLAIMED THE MEN HAD BEEN BEATEN DURING THEIR CAPTIVITY AND HAD BEEN TORTURED. OTHER SOVIET EMBASSY PERSONNEL, HOWEVER, HAVE REFUSED TO BE DRAWN OUT ON THE CONDITIONS OF THE MEN'S CAPTIVITY AND WESTERN CORRESPONDENTS HAVE NOT BEEN ALLOWED TO TALK TO THEM. THE MEN ARE, HOWEVER, SAID TO BE IN REASONABLY GOOD PHYSICAL CONDITION.

4. SOVIETS HERE ARE INCLINED TO PLAY UP THE RELEASE AS A MAJOR CHINESE EFFORT TO LESSEN TENSIONS. ON THE OTHER HAND, YU CHAN IN A PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH THE YUGOSLAV AMBASSADOR STUCK CLOSE TO HIS FORMAL STATEMENT THAT THE CASE WAS INVESTIGATED, THE MEN'S STORIES WERE FOUND TO RING TRUE, AND THEY WERE THUS RELEASED. THE FACT THAT THE CHINESE ASSEMBLED

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THE MEN IN PEKING SOME MONTHS AGO SUGGESTS TO US THAT THE CHINESE MAY HAVE PLANNED TO RELEASE THEM FOR SOME TIME, AND WERE MERELY WAITING FOR THE APPROPRIATE MOMENT. THEY MAY WELL HAVE CONSIDERED -- AND THEN DECIDED AGAINST-- RELEASING THEM PRIOR TO PRESIDENT FORD'S VISIT IN ORDER TO RAISE THE POSSIBILITY OF IMPROVED SINO-SOVIET STATE RELATIONS AS A BARGAINING LEVER WITH THE UNITED STATES. THE CURRENT TIMING IS PROBABLY DESIGNED TO GAIN MAXIMUM IMPACT ON

PLANNING FOR THE TWENTY-FIFTH SOVIET PARTY CONGRESS. EAST EUROPEAN DIPLOMATS IN PEKING APPEAR CONVINCED THAT THE CHINESE MOVE IS DESIGNED TO STRENGTHEN THE HANDS OF THOSE AT THE CONGRESS DISINCLINED TO TAKE A HARD ANTI-CHINESE STAND BY DEMONSTRATING THE PRC'S "REASONABLENESS." SUCH A PLOY STRUKES US AS TYPICALLY CHINESE AND THE PROBABLE MOTIVE FOR THE TIMING OF THE RELEASE. IT IS CONCEIVEABLE THAT THE CHINESE MAY BE TEMPTED TO PUT FORWARD SOME OTHER EVIDENCE OF THEIR "REASONABLENESS" IN THE NEXT MONTH OR TWO FOR THE SAME PURPOSE, ALTHOUGH SOVIET DIPLOMATS HERE HAVE SHRUGGED OFF SPECULATION ABOUT A POSSIBLE GROMYKO STOP OVER ON HIS RETURN FROM JAPAN NEXT MONTH OR A RE-VITALIZATION OF THE BORDER NEGOTIATIONS.

5. WHEN WE RAISED THE ISSUE OF OTHER SOVIET CITIZENS BEING HELD BY THE

CHINESE AS ALLEGED RECENTLY ON TELEVISION BY KAPITSA, ONE SOVIET EMBOFF SUGGESTED THAT THESE MEN MAY WELL HAVE BEEN DEFECTORS. HE WOULD NOT IDENTIFY THESE PEOPLE, BUT SAID THAT THE SOVIETS HAD RECEIVED NO WORD ON THEM FROM THE CHINESE, HE IMPLIED THE SOVIETS ARE MUCH LESS CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR CASES THAN THEY WERE ABOUT THE HELICOPTER CREW. THAYER

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